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Television Information Office

OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BROADCASTERS

666 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 19, NEW YORK, PLAZA 7-4600

ROY DANISH *Director*

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In the belief that its public relations personnel are less knowledgeable about radio and television than about the print media, the American Bankers Association recently held a seminar on the use of broadcasting.

A highlight of the seminar was a speech by Burns W. Roper, managing partner of Elmo Roper and Associates. His speech on television as a transmitter of ideas reviews findings of studies the research organization made between 1959 and 1964 on the public's attitudes toward media. It also reports on two studies Roper made dealing with the sponsorship of controversial programs on television. Roper concludes that television is becoming the complete medium, satisfying the viewers' need for both fantasy and information.

He also believes that serious public relations efforts must increasingly take television into consideration as an important part of communications planning. We think you will find this talk provocative.

ELMO ROPER AND ASSOCIATES

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THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF TELEVISION NEWS AND THE MEDIUM'S EMERGING ROLE IN CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS

A speech by Burns W. Roper, managing partner of Elmo Roper and Associates, delivered on December 7, 1965, at a public relations seminar of the American Bankers Association.

I have come here today to tell you about one of the most controversial studies our firm has ever done. This study was not about admitting China to the UN, or birth control, or the sex life of teenagers, or what to do about Vietnam. The study--or rather the series of studies --was about what might first appear the rather bland subject of public attitudes toward television and other media.

Let me give you a little background on these studies. The first study was done in 1959, and the reason it was done was that the Television Information Office wanted to find out how damaging the quiz scandals had been to the image of television. Was criticism confined to the quiz shows and those who had participated in them, or had it rubbed off on television in general? Had people begun to think of television as a dishonest medium and consequently to distrust all they saw on it, including the news? To find out, we asked a number of questions, including several that compared television with other media, hoping to find out whether television had a real problem of loss of public confidence or whether it could prove to its critics that in the public's mind the quiz scandals were an unfortunate, but isolated, disgrace.

The answers were, on the whole, rather favorable to television. The rigged quiz shows came out close to the bottom of a list of "serious moral problems facing the nation," considered much less serious, for example, than "advertisers making false claims." As for comparisons with other media, this was our first question:

> "Where do you usually get most of your news about what's going on in the world today--from the newspapers or radio or television or magazines or talking to people or where?"

And these were the answers we got in 1959:

	%
Newspapers	57
Television	51
Radio	34
Magazines	8
Talking to people	4
Don't know	1

So the first thing we found out was that newspapers were the leading news source, but that television ran a close second. Then we got to the heart of the "loss of confidence" matter with this question:

> "If you got conflicting or different reports of the same news story from radio, television, the magazines, and the newspapers, which of the four versions would you be most inclined to believe--the one on radio or television or magazines or newspapers?"

Again, newspapers headed the list, with television following closely behind. These were the answers:

	%
Newspapers	32
Television	29
Radio	12
Magazines	10
Don't know	17

When this question was reversed, however, a rather different picture emerged, considerably more favorable to television, and less favorable to newspapers.

> "Which of the four versions would you be least inclined to believe-- the one on radio, television, magazines, or newspapers?"

	%
Newspapers	24
Magazines	23
Radio	10
Television	9
Don't know	34

The results of this 1959 study constituted the basis of testimony by my father, Elmo Roper, before the Federal Communications Commission, which was then investigating the television industry as a result of the quiz scandals. The results of the study, as well as the testimony, were widely released, but were not widely reported by the press. The *New York Times*, among others, did not regard it as "fit to print."

SECOND STUDY IN 1961

A second study, done two years later, was occasioned in part by a new blast of criticism from a quite different source--the "vast wasteland" speech of newly appointed FCC Commissioner Newton Minow, and, I would even guess, by the wide newspaper coverage given this blast. Again, television was cleared of the charges by most of the public--only 23% agreeing with Minow's bleak view of TV fare.

At the same time, we repeated the questions asked on the previous survey, and found that the sources from which people got their news remained virtually unchanged; television had gone up 1%--a change that could be easily accounted for solely by sampling variation.

However, when we came to the believability question, we found dramatic shifts in the answers. Television had jumped 10 points, with 39% now calling it the most believable medium. Newspapers, on the other hand, had dropped 8 points to 24%. Their positions also shifted comparably, though less sharply, on the "least believable" index. These answers suggested that television's believability rating had been hurt in 1959, and that the 1961 answers represented a bouncing back to normal, as the impact of the quiz scandals receded.

This time there were signs of life from the press, although again very few newspapers considered it fit to print. *Editor and Publisher* wrote an indignant, and in my judgment, very biased editorial. At that time Mr. Arville Schaleben, of the *Milwaukee Journal,* a newspaper editor, took it upon himself to publish a full-scale critical commentary on the study, which he published in a magazine, the *Saturday Review.* The "most believable" question, greeted with a graveyard silence on its first appearance, when newspapers came out on top, had now become "biased," supposedly written to produce results pleasing to the Television Information Office.

1963 STUDY RE-RANKED MEDIA

But, it was the third study, done two years later, which really started the fur flying. This study not only continued to show that people considered television more believable than newspapers, but for the first time showed television to be the primary source of news for the American public.

When people were asked in 1963 where they got most of their news about what's going on in the world today, they gave these answers:

	%
Television	55
Newspapers	53
Radio	29
Magazines	6
People	4
Don't know	3

A storm broke around these figures which, in my opinion, can only be explained in one way: the truth hurts. The wording of the question was said to smack of "timeliness," and hence called "rigged for television," again ignoring the fact that it had originally shown newspapers ahead.

A number of quite logical questions *can* be raised about our results. Perhaps "believability," for example, is connected with "seeing it for oneself." Yet 25 years earlier radio, the completely invisible medium, had had the same edge over newspaper reports that television does now. I myself don't know all the reasons why our figures came out as they did, but I can suggest some not even raised by their critics. Perhaps, in their own minds, people were comparing the more standard quality of network television with the more varying quality of local newspapers. This could make a difference.

Or, perhaps, they were affected by the newspapers' greater tendency to editorialize, for we have found that interpretation and bias are very closely connected in the public's mind. Legitimate expressions of editorial opinion are, for many people, tarred with the same brush as slanted reporting of the news, and newspapers may suffer as a result. And this may be compounded because some newspapers are not averse to letting their editorial comment "wander" off the editorial page.

THE SIGNIFICANT TRENDS

However, there is another perspective in which these figures must be viewed, and that is the perspective of time. Whatever exceptions may be taken to individual questions, *the trend of the answers is clear: television has been going up and newspapers have been going down.*

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CONTROVERSY ON TELEVISION: CASE HISTORY

I should like to tell you about two ways that television of a serious nature has been used effectively for public relations purposes. The first case history I shall have to be a little vague about, since I can't tell you the company or the program.

About two years ago, this company was considering sponsoring a television program which was to have a somewhat political content. The company had a degree of concern about the propriety of sponsoring what might be a controversial program. They were worried, not about the general public's response, but about the response of business leaders. Because the program had a somewhat "liberal" emphasis, what they asked us to do was to interview a number of what were expected to be "conservative" executives of financial institutions and business corporations.

We found that while there was some criticism of the project, four out of five executives interviewed responded favorably, and in fact thought it a fine thing to do. The study made it clear that most of the executives favored the sponsorship of television shows on controversial subjects; that they did not consider sponsorship tantamount to endorsement of the views expressed, and that they tended to make their judgments not in terms of whether a controversial subject was treated, but on how that subject was handled.

The company, then, faced a calculated risk of receiving a good deal of praise and some limited, but possibly vocal, criticism as well. Which is about what happened. When the show went on, it received, to no corporate surprise, a few critical blasts but considerably wider acclaim.

XEROX "CONTROVERSIAL" PROGRAMS

The second case history I can be quite a bit more specific about, because the company has itself publicized the results. It all began in the spring of 1964 when Xerox decided to put up four million dollars to underwrite a series of 90-minute film dramas designed to acquaint the American people more fully with the various activities of the UN. The project was seen by Xerox as both a move to help build a peaceful world and as part of a long-range public relations program. Xerox would have only an opening and closing institutional credit.

At first, everything went smoothly. Newspaper and magazine comments were generally favorable and a modest amount of mail trickled in to Xerox offices commending their decision to back the shows by a ten-to-one margin. But, in midsummer, the John Birch Society's bulletin told its readers: "We hate to see a corporation of this country promote the UN when we know that it is an instrument of the Soviet Communist conspiracy." Which suggested that while a boycott should not be threatened, "an avalanche of mail ought to convince (Xerox) of the unwisdom of their proposed action from a strictly business point of view."

The avalanche arrived. In all, 61,000 letters were received criticizing Xerox's proposed sponsorship of the UN shows. In fact, the writers were so ardent about their anti-UN convictions that many of them wrote up to 10 letters apiece. An analysis of the mail showed that the 61,000 letters had been written by about 16,000 people. Meanwhile, pro-UN organizations and individuals rallied to Xerox's support and came through with approximately 14,500 letters of approval for their project--written by approximately 14,500 separate individuals. The first two shows went on as scheduled, but questions remained. How much damage had been done to Xerox by its sponsorship of the UN programs? How widespread were the attitudes expressed in the critical letters received?

To find out, Xerox asked us to do a survey, which was conducted in the two weeks after the second show went on. Following interviews with a cross section of 1,500 adults, the survey found that:

(1) More than one out of four American adults had seen, read or heard about one or both of the two UN shows. One out of five had actually watched one or both of the shows.

(2) Most people who expressed opinions about the shows had distinctly favorable reactions--three out of four called them "good" or "outstanding."

(3) Among those aware of either or both shows, 31% identified Xerox as the "sponsor," despite their corporate self-effacement, and for the recent second show, sponsor recall ran as high as 48 per cent.

As to the impact of Xerox's participation, favorable comments outstripped criticism by more than ten-to-one. When those aware of the UN programs were asked directly about the concept of the series, 54 per cent called it "an extremely important and worth-while series to have on TV." Another 25 per cent said that while they had some reservations, such a series was "probably a good idea." Only five per cent called the series "not a particularly good idea." As for passionate opponents of the previous year's letter writing intensity, only one per cent expressed themselves as "strongly opposed to having such a series on TV."

CONCLUSIONS

These studies suggest that the risks of sponsoring television shows with serious, even controversial content, are generally less than supposed, and are heavily outweighed by the probable public relations gains. And, I think, the pattern of increasing reliance on television will make possible further extensions of the use of television to communicate ideas and information. I think, for example, although we have no direct data on this subject, that there should be a growing audience for increasing coverage of business news on television, an area until recently brushed off with a recital of the Dow-Jones averages. Such coverage, and its sponsorship, ought to draw, not perhaps in quantitative terms--but surely in qualitative terms--the most receptive and rewarding audience that exists.

We have reached a point, not where television is about to become a teacher instead of a plaything, but where television is increasingly turned to as the *complete* medium, capable of satisfying the needs for both fantasy *and* information. With this extending range, there is now considerable room for development of imaginative uses of television in areas where other media have long been considered adequate. It is usually the newer companies in the newer fields, which take the best advantage of such opening opportunities. Even the tool of research itself, which can indicate the directions in which these opportunities lie, is more often used by television than newspapers, by airlines more than railroads. But I think that you, from one of the oldest professions, have much to gain by creative use of this very newest medium.

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